

BOOK REVIEW

INDIGENOUS
MOTHERS, SISTERS,
AND GIRLFRIENDS,
AND THEIR SELF-
INSCRIPTION IN THE
FEMALE/FEMINIST
CANON

Martina Horáková. *Inscribing Difference and Resistance: Indigenous Women's Personal Non-fiction and Life Writing in Australia and North America*. Brno: MuniPress, 2017, pp. 207

This book explores Aileen Moreton-Robinson's claim that the "Indigenous woman's body had been positioned within white society as being accessible, available, deviant, and expendable" (12). At the nexus of patriarchy, emerging capitalism, and colonialism Indigenous women lost their voices in both public and private spheres. They have only recently begun to write their stories down, in order to regain some of this lost power. An array of literary criticism on subjective Indigenous non-fiction and life writing has emerged since its beginnings in the 2000s. Among the authors writing in the genre are Sally Morgan and John Eakin, whose diverse critical terminology highlights the divergence of this corpus.

This study is informed by subjective non-fiction by Paula Gunn Allen (1939–2008) from the USA, Lee Maracle (1950–) from Canada, and Jackie Huggins (1956–) from Australia, and by life writing by Doris Pilkington Garimara

(1937–2914) from Australia, Shirley Sterling (1948–2005) from Canada, and Anna Lee Walters (1946–) from the USA. The analysis of their texts reveals how Indigenous women's writing re-defines the construction of the self in (auto)biographies. It displaces and hybridises traditional genres by blurring the boundaries between (auto)biography, historical writing, personal narrative, poetry and fiction, and employs innovative narrative strategies by introducing traditional Indigenous storytelling into Western narrative forms (20).

In the book's first section, the theories of Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Aileen Moreton Robinson and Andrea Smith are employed to illustrate how Allen, Maracle and Huggins intervened in the mainstream feminist agenda to expose fissures in the universal category of "Woman". This is done first through scholarly criticism, which detects these authors' differences in relation to mainstream feminist writing. Therein Horáková employs Mohanty, who draws on Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an imagined community. This enables her to formulate an imagined community of "third world" women, who collaborate across boundaries and make connections between the diverse contexts of their struggles, thus forging a political identity through writing. Moreton Robinson employs the strategy of Indigenous women talking up to white women, of "daring to disagree" and "having an opinion" (31) when she identifies the seizure of alternative discourses from African American, Latin American and lesbian feminists as an Indigenous intervention in mainstream feminism. Last, Miheesuah's criticism points to the critical implications that Indigenous writers are authoritative voices speaking for Indigenous women, and the

damaging effects this can have. It shows that "it is misleading to conclude that Indigenous women can never endorse feminism, and, at the same time, their particular communities' interest" (37). To further this claim, Horáková evokes Smith, who writes about the importance of the coalition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and its numerous forms.

With this difference in mind, Horáková discusses Paul Allen's gynocracies, focusing on *The Sacred Hoop*. She singles out the chapter "How the West Was Really Won," which describes the conquering of the West as a destruction of "gynecentric, egalitarian, ritual-based social systems" and their conversion to a European patriarchal social structure (43). Horáková points out that Allen weaves personal experiences into her critical writings (which some critics perceive as harmful to the validity of her research and writing) and then provides an overview of this criticism. Aware that Allen, who writes that "her method of choice is [her] own understanding of American Indian life and thought" (53), occasionally appears ambivalent and inconsistent, Horáková nonetheless claims that the former's importance lies in "opening up space for re-thinking the ways in which patriarchal and colonialist discourses have silenced Indigenous women" (47).

While recognising and identifying the shortcomings of Lee Maracle's *I am a Woman* – which, similarly to Allen's writings, lie in Maracle's statements about her inner self – Horáková places them perceptively in Trinh T. Minh-ha's "triple bind": being a woman, a woman of colour and a writer. She stresses that the importance of this text lies in "its strategy of deconstructing previously held claims that sexism in Native communi-

ties is secondary because it was alien to pre-contact social structures and that it will be erased once the Indigenous society is successfully decolonised." (54) Maracle explains that in fact it is the other way around. Horáková describes Jackie Huggins' critique in *Sister Girl* of the complicity of white women in Australia's colonisation and racism, but ultimately voices the importance of cross-cultural learning and reconciliation: "we have joined forces as a white woman and a Black woman to refute claims by feminists that all women are the same" (59).

Having delineated Allen, Maracle and Huggins' difference in relation to "white" feminist thought, in the second chapter Horáková discusses the self-representations of Indigenous womanhood, motherhood, and sisterhood in their texts. Namely, Horáková claims that the "governing principles" of Indigenous women's writing are "grief over the loss of tribal powers, forcibly separated children, and the denial of motherhood" on one hand, and the "affirmation of female nurturing, maternity and sexuality, including the celebration of female ancestors" on the other (61). To describe the ways in which Indigenous womanhood is re-constructed, Horáková employs Kim Anderson's theory of four steps: resist, reclaim, construct and act. This theory is described in Anderson's *A Recognition of Being*, and is intended to lead to the "decolonization of our [Indigenous] womanhood" (62). Analysing Huggins's *Sister Girl*, Horáková underlines the two-fold issue Australian Indigenous women have had to face: white motherhood as a central site of the national myth, and the imposition of the Western European patriarchal nuclear family on Indigenous communities. The second destroyed the traditional Indigenous extended family, which saw the role

of the mother (who taught children to read the landscape and survive in the bush) as one of empowerment. However, second-wave feminists discarded the ideology of the female sphere being private/domestic, perceiving family life as oppressive. Consequently, they lacked a critical interest in it, until recent scholarly attention was paid to autobiographies, memoirs, journals and diaries, rendering the private sphere visible and attributing it equal importance. Even with this change, Horáková correctly observes that "Indigenous women's commitment to domesticity and family life was seen, due to long-term external intervention and pressure to assimilate, as unattainable and, in fact, unavailable." (67). Thus these women were effectively denied their motherhood. Allen, Maracle and Huggins seek to retrieve the strong mother of the Indigenous past. In *The Secret Hoop* Allen names "various social functions and diverse powers that Native American women had held before European colonisers imposed patriarchy on them" (70). She is convinced, claims Horáková, that the key to Indigenous female empowerment is a reconnection with mythological and spiritual female powers, placing the key to Indigenous womanhood in motherhood and its connection with the earth. Here Horáková gives a useful and extensive list of scholarly literature that addresses the recovery of the mother figure (71).

Reading Maracle's texts, Horáková neatly delineates a movement from anger at Indigenous women for failing to liberate themselves, toward an awareness of the importance of female solidarity, friendship and support. In Huggins' *Sister Jackie*, Horáková recognises this sisterhood as "a concept essential to [the] understanding of Aboriginal women's realities" (73). Horáková underlines

that while Huggins draws a strict line between white and Indigenous women due to historical events, she also calls for alliances of disempowered women across the world.

Allen, Maracle and Huggins all engage in writing back to their foremothers, but Horáková claims they do so in different ways. Allen gives a detailed overview of North American stories and myths to show how limiting it is to perceive women only as mothers. Maracle needed "the teachings of [her] grandmothers" to heal her "sickened spirit," thus attributing a space of security, comfort and protection to the role of grandmother. While Maracle's grandmother is a composite of several native women, Huggins' is her own mother. In *Auntie Rita* Huggins uses her mother's story to show that the site of motherhood has changed in Australia, to combine the traditional Aboriginal concept with the modern urban experience.

Last, Horáková studies life writing with a political dimension, enabling the empowerment of the authors and their peoples. Horáková ingeniously terms Allen's writing as "mestizaje écriture feminine": a method that Allen states is "somewhat western and somewhat Indian" (93), and shows Indigenous people that their individual experiences of oppression are not isolated, but shared by others who share the same colonial context. When discussing Maracle, Horáková dwells on the notion of oratory: Maracle's "idea of telling theory through story in Indigenous critical discourse" (100). She describes the process: Maracle contrasts Western theory, which she finds incomprehensible and dehumanised, with Indigenous oratory, which represents "accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of entire people or peoples" (Maracle in

Horáková 101). Maracle fuses the two through stories. The third strategy is that of Jackie Huggins, whose writing Horáková sees as having a "dual voice". Huggins uses her mother's biography to address the experience of an Australian woman at a particular point in time, and combines it with her own. This transcription of her family's lives is as important as Huggins' task "to write down Aboriginal women's history in Australia from an Indigenous perspective and to voice her political activism" (106).

The second section of the book discusses life writing by Doris Pilkington Garimara, Shirley Sterling, and Anna Lee Walters. Horáková argues that this type of writing "aims to come to terms with the suppressed histories of separation and assimilation and to bear witness to the subsequent collective trauma" (117). She reads these works through Bill Ashcroft's concept of "resistance literature" (124), claiming that they "write back to the centre." These authors resist being silenced, by writing and publishing their stories; by writing in English (thus seizing part of the dominant society's power); by appropriating European literary genres while simultaneously subverting them with non-European narrative techniques; and by thematically depicting traditional cultural practices. They resist stylistically by integrating elements from Indigenous languages (sometimes without translation), and through fragmentation and repetition, techniques adopted from the storytelling tradition.

Their resistance is also visible, Horáková claims, in their inscription of "subjugated knowledges", a term she borrows from Foucault. She especially focuses on the "historical knowledge of struggles", which is concerned with conflicts and hostile encounters that are "confined to the margins of knowledge

... by the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges" (128). It is precisely this kind of knowledge that is foregrounded in the writings analysed. Thus Horáková argues that Doris Pilkington writes counter-(hi)story by negotiating Aboriginal oral traditions and European literary conventions. Horáková describes Pilkington's dual principle of the organisation of her text: it fuses a historical perspective based on archival materials and official records with a perspective based on Aboriginal (hi)stories of first contact, some recorded and some fictional. In this way, Pilkington produces what Anne Brewster called "counter-archive" (135). Horáková terms Shirley Sterling's writing alternative (hi)story; Sterling resists and adapts the residential school system, although resistance is more visible. The portrayal of the Native family and its everyday activities thus communicates the complexity of hybrid knowledge. Anna Lee Walters writes tribal (hi)stories, Horáková argues, by foregrounding Indigenous storytelling and tradition. Walters models her narratives on the collective sources of oral stories: settler history is marginalised. In Horáková's analysis of Walters's *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing* she focuses on the second part of the book, in which Walters "reconstructs the tribal histories of the three Indigenous groups, which becomes her most significant strategy for re-writing history" (149).

The penultimate chapter relates the aforementioned texts to contemporary issues of human rights violations. To do so it employs trauma studies, notions of memory and forgetting, and healing through scriptotherapy. Horáková borrows the latter term from Suzette Henke, to refer to the idea of empowering oneself through writing. The final chapter

deals with a difference between Indigenous and Western models of self-construction by employing Arnold Krupat's theory. Krupat states that Indigenous life writing does not present an autonomous individual self, but rather privileges "collective subject and multiple voices" (176). Horáková also uses Krupat's term of the "dialogic self" (177), to denote texts that present two voices, as well as narratives by Indigenous writers with two cultural backgrounds. Horáková argues that this dialogic character is evident in the narratives analysed, in "explicit or implicit dialogue[s] between narrative voices" (184); in dialogue between the past and present, wherein historiography and storytelling are inseparable; in the cross-culturality of the narratives; and in the "dialogic relationship between orality and literacy" (184).

The value of this book lies in what the analysed texts bring to the traditional apparatus of Anglo-American criticism: a description of its potential for change. These texts challenge the traditional genres of (auto)biography, the idea of the self, history writing, personal narratives, poetry and fiction, basking in the hybridity created through the insertion of Indigenous storytelling into Western narrative forms. Therefore, the book will be interesting not only to specialists in Australian studies, but to all who appreciate these genres for their resistance to the dominant, colonially-based structures. In essence the book provides a revaluation of the Western literary canon and traditional Western literary criticism.

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